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Title Page

The Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco and the Lega Nord: Continuities and Discontinuities

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The Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco and the Lega Nord: Continuities and Discontinuities

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Studies of the Lega Nord (Northern League) have tended either to ignore the existence of earlier movements for regional autonomy in the 1950s – such as the Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco – or, on the contrary, assume continuities between the two movements at the expense of analysis of the significant discontinuities. This article argues that neither approach has been successful in capturing the importance of precursors to *legghismo* and that a more nuanced analysis is required. Focusing on the Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco (MAB) in its various incarnations between 1947 and 1970, I argue that the Bergamascan autonomists of the post-war period in many ways laid the foundations for Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord; however, it is historically inaccurate to claim a direct line of continuity between *mabismo* and *legghismo* due to the differing contexts in which each movement operated: the critical junctures of the post-war era and post-tangentopoli respectively. What emerges from a closer analysis of the relationship between the two movements, as *mabismo* evolved into *legghismo* in the 1980s is a picture of regional autonomism distancing itself from the ideal of national unity and being increasingly drawn to secessionism

Keywords: Lega Nord, Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco, regional autonomy, regionalism, federalism

Introduction

In 1955, Guido Calderoli, grandfather of Lega Nord senator Roberto Calderoli, wrote the following message for his own autonomist movement, the Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco (MAB): “All we are asking for is Lombardy for the Lombards, Bergamo for the Bergamascons, Brescia for the Brescians!” (Calderoli 1957, 178). The most obvious comparison for any scholar of North Italian regionalism is to put this message alongside that

of the Lega Autonomista Lombarda (now the Lega Nord) in the early 1980s, which barely 30 years later was formed on the principle of obtaining “integral political, administrative and cultural autonomy of Lombardy” (Bossi 1983). Reading these two extracts together, one assumes that between the post-war autonomist current in Bergamo and the *legghismo* which emerged in the 1980s, there was more than just the inter-generational link of the Calderolis. There were indeed, many similarities which went beyond a shared desire for greater regional autonomy, including cross-overs in anti-southern, anti-bureaucratic, anti-centralist and anti-Roman discourse. But many elements and issues raised by the Bergamascons regarding the importance of Italian unity would have been anathema to Lega ideology, let alone the fact that *legghismo* emerged after the 1970s regional reforms, and therefore stood for a different type of regional autonomy from that for which the Bergamascan autonomists had campaigned.

This article examines whether and to what extent there are continuities and discontinuities between the MAB and the Lega Nord. The fact that there have been two waves of regionalist activism in Bergamo is far from casual, and the salience of the issue of regional autonomy in this province can be attributed to several factors. As well as the influence of a particular Bergamascan Catholic subculture, Bergamo is also one of the most productive, rich and dynamic areas of Italy (Boulliaud and DeMatteo 2004: 39; DeMatteo 2011: 17). Bergamascons, therefore, tend to define themselves – often in oppositional terms with the rest of Italy – as people who work and produce. This, in combination with Bergamo’s geographic location as a mountain city have helped create a sub-culture of “localism” through which Bergamascons “feel that their town is self-sufficient” (DeMatteo 2011: 18). All of these factors played a central role to the political message of both the MAB and the Lega and will be examined in greater detail throughout the article.

By analysing and comparing numerous variables present in both waves of regionalist activism, what emerges is a nuanced analysis of the MAB’s role as a precursor to *legghismo*. In doing so, the article not only contributes to the extensive existing literature on the Lega, but also seeks to widen the field by bringing to the fore a movement that has largely been overlooked in the history of North Italian regional autonomy. My research naturally draws on this literature on the Lega (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Diamanti 1993; 1996; Levy 1996). Such works have not only provided important historical contextualization of the movement but have also contributed greatly to our understanding of a constantly changing and evolving political organisation. However, less attention has been paid to earlier movements for regional autonomy such as the MAB of the 1950s.. A number of studies on

the Lega mention their existence, but generally they do not provide a comparative analysis with contemporary *legghismo* (Gold 2001; Cachafeiro 2001; Toso 1996).

More frequently, the existence of historic movements has in the past been seized upon by Lega Nord ideologues such as Gilberto Oneto and Beppe Burzio who, in writing for *Quaderni Padani* (Padanian notebooks a Lega-affiliated journal), have referred to the movements by way of historical legitimisation for the Lega Nord. (Burzio 2000; Oneto 2013) This represents one of the key pitfalls for the historian who, in trying to provide a balanced analysis, is sometimes dealing with the same materials used by those who have clearly partisan political motives.

Perhaps the most important academic contribution to date towards the examination of the links between the Lega Nord and MAB was the claim by Boulliaud and DeMatteo (2004, 33) that Umberto Bossi's Lega Lombarda which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s was nothing more than the latest manifestation of an autonomist current rooted in the Catholic subculture in Bergamo. The authors argued that the autonomist stance in the post-war period found representation through the strong Catholic subculture in Lombardy and the Veneto, which manifested itself through loyalty to the DC. Once these ties began to break in the 1980s, the autonomist current which had existed in the decades following the end of World War Two could finally find a voice in *legghismo*. In a subsequent publication, De Matteo (2011) built upon this thesis with part of her book arguing strongly for strong elements of continuity between Mabismo and Legghismo.

It is my contention, however, that Boulliaud and DeMatteo, by insisting that *legghismo* was “an old political programme, new only in appearance” focus too much on aspects of continuity, neglecting the broader ideas of the post-war Bergamascan autonomists that run counter to their thesis (Boulliaud and DeMatteo 2004, 33). While the present article builds upon many of the ideas presented in the aforementioned authors' study, it takes a different approach by focusing on four key variables common to both waves of activism. First, anti-fascism; second, the extent to which the movements provided an alternative to the DC; third, the Federalist, Republican and (North) European identity of each movement; and finally, the extent to which each wave of activism focused on the notion of The Invasion of the North by the Other. These variables will allow for a more balanced analysis of the continuities and discontinuities between the MAB and the Lega.

In terms of methodology, this article examines a variety of propaganda, ideas and writings of the Bergamascan autonomists which shows not only similarities but also significant differences when compared to *legghismo*. The analysis will focus principally on

the period between 1948 and 1970. 1948 saw the approval of the Italy's new Constitution but, crucially, not the full activation of the 20 regions sanctioned by the Constitution. It was only with the regional reform in 1968 that electoral laws were adopted to vote for regional councils; the first of these elections were held in 1970. Further analysis in the final section will also focus on the early 1980s when these reforms were not followed by a dissolution of regionalist movements, but instead saw autonomist ideas continue to circulate in Lombardy.

The vast majority of sources consulted were produced by activists in the Bergamascan autonomist movement: the analysis is based on primary sources consisting mainly of writings, Lega Nord publications, and interviews.¹ The interviews were with Piedmontese autonomist and self-declared “counter-historian”, Roberto Gremmo, who shed light on the later years of the Bergamascan autonomists, and also with Giuseppe Sala, the son-in-law of Gianfranco Gonella, who became communal councilor for the MAB in 1956. Sala provided an insight into the *raison d'être* of the MAB and as a life-long resident of Bergamo, he gave his opinion on certain similarities and differences between the MAB and *legghismo*.

The article is divided into six sections. The first traces the development of the Bergamascan autonomist movement from 1948 until 1970. The following sections carry out a thematic based analysis of MAB's political discourse, examining the aforementioned overlapping variables. The final section draws conclusions by comparing MAB's programme with that of the Lega, analyzing elements of continuity and discontinuity in the political discourse of the two waves of regionalist activism.

Bergamascan autonomy after 1948

Before looking at some specific themes which emerged in the discourse of the Bergamascan autonomists, it is worth tracing a brief history of the origins of MAB, its membership, and its electoral history from the immediate post-war period until the first regional elections in 1970. As early as June 1947, six months before the Republican Constitution came into effect, a meeting was organized by lawyer and member of the Republican party Giulio Bergmann, and was attended by a number of middle-class Bergamascan professionals including teachers, dentists, doctors, accountants, and lawyers (Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi 1955, 59). A few months later, 11 members formed a group based in Bergamo named the “Movimento per

¹ Primary sources located at the following locations:

Istituto Bergamasco per la Storia della Resistenza e dell'età contemporanea (ISREC), Biblioteca Angelo Mai, and Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma.

le Autonomie Locali” (MAL). MAL, “independent of any political party”, intended “to dedicate itself to the democratic principles of Local Autonomy”. (Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi, 1955, 59; Freddi 1963, 5).

As the Constitution was being written, the Bergamascan Autonomists were putting their views forward to the Constituent Assembly advocating the creation of regional government (Freddi 1963, 6). Following 1948, when the approval of the regional statutes on paper did not translate into reality for regions which fell outside the criteria for the special statutes awarded to Sicily, Sardinia, Val D’Aosta and Trentino-Alto Adige, Anselmo Freddi, one of the MAL’s original members, stated that “the regional statutes we had desired had now been written into the Constitution. It became our duty to ensure they were activated” (Freddi 1963, 6). Following a period of writing essays, pamphlets and articles on regional autonomy, the Bergamascan autonomists took part in campaigns in regions outside Lombardy. Campaigning in piazzas in Trieste and then Friuli gave many of the Bergamascan activists their first taste of the art of the oratory instead of simply putting pen to paper and the process inspired a desire to stand in elections (Freddi 1963, 14).

In 1956, these activists renamed themselves as the Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco, (MAB) and presented a list of candidates in the administrative elections to the Communal and Provincial councils. Their symbol was a slave breaking free from the bureaucratic chains of Rome (Fig. 1). The MAB received 1,248 votes (1.98%) of the 63,173 votes in the Communal elections.² With the highest number of preference votes, Guido Calderoli was elected as Communal Councillor. MAB’s list for the provincial council also received 1,381 votes (2.23%) of the 61,926 votes cast and saw Calderoli’s autonomist colleague Ugo Gavazzeni elected as a provincial councillor. Although Calderoli stepped down from his post as communal councillor to be replaced by fellow MAB member, Gianfranco Gonella, he continued to play an active role in the movement. In particular, Calderoli put his efforts into establishing, at least on paper, the Movimento per l’Autonomia Regionale Lombarda (MARL, 1958). This project, however, was to be superseded by a more ambitious vision of associating the autonomist movement with all the provinces of Piedmont and almost all those of Lombardy and the Veneto, Trentino and Friuli (Freddi 1963, 19)

²All administrative and national election results sourced from:
Archivio Storico Comune di Bergamo (ACBg)
Categoria 6 (Governo)
Classe a
Fasc. 1 e 2
Anni 1954-1964

On 23rd February 1958, various autonomist movements from the North came together to fight elections under a single list known as the Movimento Autonomie Regionali Padane (MARPadania), an acronym which had previously belonged to the largest of these regionalist movements, the Movimento per l'Autonomia Regionale Piemontese (MARP) (Fig. 2). The announcement of this electoral pact failed to send shock-waves through the nation, or indeed to attract much media attention outside of Turin's *La Stampa*. The coalition did not return a single candidate in the election. (*La Stampa* 1958). The MARPadania Bergamascan delegation list received a reduced vote share in the Bergamo-Brescia electoral college with 772 votes (1.11%) of the 69,303 cast for the Chamber of Deputies and 764 votes (1.23%) out of 62,145 for the Senate. This significant drop in the vote for the Bergamascan autonomists led to a meeting in 1960 at which "with 7 votes against one it was decided to put on the table cordial talks with the DC of Bergamo"; at the root of these talks was an agreement that "in exchange for renouncing the autonomist struggle, MAB's key exponents would be welcomed into the DC list" (Freddi 1963, 20).

"A good four of the seven" autonomists, after abandoning the title of Mabisti, did not opt to join the DC's list but instead assumed "the new name of *Autonomisti*" and changed their symbol to a "Campanile".³ This rump movement only had sufficient numbers to present a list at the Provincial Council; however, receiving only 530 (0.81%) of the 65,040 votes cast, the autonomists failed to re-elect any member to the council. Certain members of this rump movement would continue to remain active in politics in the 1960s and in 1968 would form the Unione Autonomisti d'Italia (UAI) under the leadership of former MAB provincial councillor and friend of Guido Calderoli, Ugo Gavazzeni (Freddi 1963, 20).

The message of the UAI was very similar to that of its predecessors, with its leader being keen to "underline the logical continuity between the MAB, the MARP and the UAI" (Gavazzeni 1968). However, during their doomed election campaign of 1968, the candidates of the UAI, in the words of Boulliaud and DeMatteo, "managed to speak, but without making themselves heard" (2004, 44). As Roberto Gremmo accurately notes, despite the presence of the MARPadania and later the UAI throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, it was not until 1979, when Bruno Salvadori of the Union Valdotaïne put together his autonomist list of *Contro Roma*, that regional autonomy was to make any significant inroads into Italian

³ Archivio Storico Comune di Bergamo (ACBg)
Categoria 6 (Governo)
Classe a
Fasc. 1 e 2
Anni 1954-1964

politics. That event marked the decisive moment for the autonomist leagues that the Bergamascan autonomists had aspired to over 30 years earlier (Gremmo 2016).

The Bergamascan autonomists' modest success in electing a provincial and communal councillor in 1956 pales in comparison to the electoral successes of the Lega Lombarda-Lega Nord which would in 1987 elect Umberto Bossi and Giuseppe Leoni to the Senate and the House of Representatives respectively. The Lega would go on to enjoy a level of electoral success that has seen it survive to the time of writing, albeit with a somewhat changed *raison d'être* compared to its 1980s incarnation.

If, as has been argued by Boulliaud and DeMatteo, *legghismo* was a continuation of *mabismo* and was thus "an old political programme, new only in appearance" (2004, 45), a pertinent question remains as to why there was such a difference in the political success of each wave of activism. The authors offer Umberto Bossi's leadership and the changing socio-economic landscape in the 1980s as explanations for the sudden appeal of this "old programme" (2004, 34). Indeed, it is true that Bossi provided the autonomist movement in Lombardy with a much needed injection of charisma and leadership which had been lacking in the 1950s and 1960s. It is also true that 1980s socio-economic conditions were more favourable for a political grouping like the Lega Lombarda-Lega Nord which promised greater innovation for small and family-owned firms in the North East. However, it is debatable whether Bossi would have been able to sell his project had it not changed in scope since the formation of the MAL in 1948.

This change is strongly linked to both a parallel and paradox which emerges from a comparison of *mabismo* and *legghismo*, relating to the two critical junctures in Italian history at which each movement emerged. *Mabismo* was a product of the post-1945 period and the transition between fascism and the Republic (later to be known as the First Republic). As a result, the post-war autonomists, with ideals of autonomy and decentralization that would have been complete anathema to fascist ideology, could present themselves as defenders of the newly born Republic. With the new political entity in its early phases and untouched by the scandals that would later shake the post-war consensus to its core, the regionalism promoted by the MAB in the 1940s and 1950s did not share the anti-nation-state message central to the ideology of *legghismo*.

The Italian nation-state, defended by MAB in the post-1945 period, was, conversely, attacked by the Lega Lombarda-Lega Nord from the moment of the movement's inception in 1984. The Lega's accusations of corruption against the parties of the First Italian Republic appeared to be vindicated following the Tangentopoli scandals in 1992 which led to another

moment of transition for the Italian state. The electoral reform of 1993 which followed this scandal, shifting from a proportional to a largely majoritarian system, constituted in the words of Donald Sassoon “a real electoral earthquake” in that “all the old parties were either wiped out or emerged as much weakened” (Sassoon 1995, 128). These differing contexts thus reflect the changing role of the nation-state in Italian regionalist discourse over a 40-year period.

Anti-fascism

Emerging two years after the end of World War Two, MAB presented regional autonomy as a new system of government that could help Italy distance itself from fascism. The MAB was not alone in presenting regional autonomy as an anti-fascist programme during this period and should be understood in the wider context of a number of movements that were seeking regional autonomy as a bulwark against a return to a dictatorship. This has been demonstrated by Lorenzo Baratter, in his comprehensive history of one of the most significant of these movements, the *Associazione Studi Autonomistici Regionali* (ASAR) from MAB’s neighbouring province of Trentino. Baratter claimed that post-war demands for autonomy should be considered as being “closely linked to that of reconstruction”. Regional autonomy was part of drawing line under the “tragic experience of fascism and the annexation to Germany and the Third Reich” (2009, 18). It should be noted that while there are no explicit links between the MAB and the ASAR, the former was in contact with similar movements and held similar goals relating to regional autonomy, including that of anti-fascism.

MAB put forward the argument that centralist institutional systems, even if democratic on the surface, always had the potential to deteriorate into totalitarian dictatorships. This is evident from an extract from an essay written prior to the 1956 elections, a mere 8 years following the establishment of the Republic, which stated that “all centralized states are by their very nature totalitarian... just like all autonomist states, of a pluralist nature are by their very nature democratic” (Meli 1956, 45). This was echoed by Anselmo Freddi’s assertion that “the original sin of bureaucratic centralism was brought to a grotesque conclusion with the Fascist ventennio” (Freddi 1963, 10). With anti-fascism as the dominant ideology and myth of the post-war Italian Republic, the MAB strategically aligned their regionalist ideology with prevailing ideological currents. This is evident through the autonomists citing the second President of the Italian Republic, Luigi Einaudi’s argument that “the Regional Body was the only bulwark possible against the return of any form of dictatorship” (Rinaldi 1949, 21).

In terms of a genuine commitment to the anti-fascist Resistance movement, whether there were in fact any partisans involved in the MAB itself is doubtful. In a recent interview, Giuseppe Sala, the son-in-law of a leading MAB exponent, stated that “there were certainly people (in the movement) who were anti-fascist, but they did not take part in the partisan brigades.” (Sala 2016). That the autonomists were not part of the armed anti-fascist struggle, however, did not exclude them from promoting ideals and politics that had previously been promoted by partisans such as Piero Malvestiti, founder and proponent of Movimento Guelfo D’Azione, the Catholic partisan organisation that had been a precursor to the DC. The MAB, through its publication of leaflets and booklets promoting regional autonomy as a guarantor of democracy and freedom, was in many ways continuing Malvestiti’s tradition of “the partisan that knows of economy and politics” (Bocca 1972, 181). Malvestiti had stated that the resistance, “as much as an armed struggle, was an intellectual struggle to put forward the right future plan for an Italian state” (Freddi 1963, 17).

Anselmo Freddi, a leading *mabista*, was keen to present Bergamascan autonomists as carrying on the local and regional values that had formed this part of the Resistance and in particular, the 12 points of the “Programme of Milan” drawn up by Movimento Guelfo D’Azione partisans. Freddi highlighted that

in this programme, what was laid out was decentralisation, autonomy and the strengthening of the communes and of the regions: the attribution to the Regions of normative functions, especially in administrative and financial areas (Freddi 1963, 17).

These ideas, relating to greater freedom and democracy for the nation, played a large part in the MAB’s programme leading up to the 1956 elections, during which it presented a challenge to the DC.

An alternative to the DC

In the 1950s, the fact that the MAB supported the political views of Piero Malvestiti was not only relevant in terms of an anti-fascist message, but also to Bergamo’s Catholic sub-culture. Malvestiti’s partisan organisation evolved into the DC, with Malvestiti himself going on to serve as a government minister. The MAB, meanwhile, presented itself as an opponent to the DC and sought to penetrate the Catholic subculture in Bergamo. The following paragraphs, analyse the MAB’s propaganda and writings aimed at DC voters; this analysis will later be used in the concluding section to challenge the extent to which this element of an “alternative

to the DC” demonstrates a link between the two waves of activism by taking into account some important contextual differences.

In terms of the post-war autonomists, the Catholic identity of one of the MAB’s leading exponents, Guido Calderoli, was highlighted by Boulliaud and DeMatteo who argued that the minor breakthrough in the 1956 local election of the Bergamascan autonomists depended on the fact that Guido Calderoli “was closely linked to the clergy in Bergamo”. A statement from Innocente Calderoli, Guido Calderoli’s son, that in the elections of 1956, rather than voting for the DC, “many priests of Val Brembana asked people to vote for my Father” (Boulliaud and DeMatteo 2004, 38) is further supported by notes left by fellow activist Aldo Rizzi, which reveal that he and Calderoli often distributed materials and propaganda to priests in the hope that they would spread the message (Rizzi 1959). MAB also printed on one of its posters, “if you vote for our list you will not be betraying the party which you are a member of”, suggesting that regionalism was a new way of bypassing partisan politics and appealing to a province in which a large number of people voted for the DC (MAB 1956).

Giuseppe Sala, when explaining the reason for which his father-in-law, Gianfranco Gonella, had participated in the MAB, stated that the movement had originally “adopted a characteristic of Christian Democracy i.e. to claim the importance of local autonomy.” He added that “historically, the PPI (Partito Popolare Italiano) was born with this purpose” (Sala 2016). This reference to Luigi Sturzo’s Popular Party is significant as the MAB did indeed attempt to attract a protest vote against the DC by labelling the party as illegitimate heirs of the PPI for not having remained loyal to Sturzo’s autonomist ideal. Guido Calderoli, citing the fact that Bergamo had been the “most loyal province to Christian Democracy” claimed that Bergamascans had been betrayed by the DC’s failure to implement regional reform. This betrayal was viewed not only as damaging to the region, but also dangerous to national unity between Italians (Calderoli 1957, 111).

The MAB even cited the Pope in their electoral campaign in 1958, quoting Pius XIII as saying “the region is one of the many forms of unity...which has been instituted in various States. The regional body has its value and must be conserved and encouraged” (MAB 1958). According to Guido Calderoli, it was as a result of the MAB’s propaganda in the region that the DC became more open to the idea of regional autonomy and in 1960 “printed a brochure entitled ‘We want the Region’” (Freddi 1963, 19). As a result the DC eventually came to be seen as “the most natural environment...to finally pursue actions and activate institutional

autonomy, putting an end to the dualism of belonging to two political organisations” (Freddi 1963, 20).

This Catholic message was also conflated with federalism with passages from a MAB publication *Parole Autonomistiche*, containing messages such as “only those with a degenerate soul can be opposed to an idea of federalism...those averse to this idea are only those who nestle in the heart of Satan” (Riva 1950, 22). The promotion of federalism in the post-war period therefore ran parallel to the aforementioned Catholic and anti-fascist message and forms the focus of the following section.

Federalism and a (Northern) European identity

The promotion of a federalist Republic which looked towards a wider European project to safeguard the rights of the region formed a further theme in the MAB’s political message and another another apparent connection with leghismo. Giulio Bergmann, founder of MAB’s predecessor, the Movimento per le Autonomie Locali, was a member of the small Republican party, and while never displaying any overt anti-monarchical tendencies, the early Bergamascan autonomists saw themselves as defenders of the 1948 Republican Constitution and the regional body of government as fundamental to the survival of the Republic. This is evident from the statement from one of the MAL autonomists, Guido Santinoli, in 1948 that with “the regional statutes on paper” it was the “duty of the Bergamascan autonomists to ensure that they were activated in the most fruitful manner” (Freddi 1963, 12).

In terms of looking to a European project, the writings of the Bergamascan autonomists in the post-war period represented a desire to find unity within a European federalist framework stating, for example, that “a European federation is the point of departure, not of arrival.” They insisted that “we need to start to think in a European way, in a global way” (Riva 1950, 40). It is therefore unsurprising that one of MAB’s propaganda postcards introduced a new design for the Italian flag. This flag promoted federalism, Republicanism and Europeanism respectively in one fell swoop by adopting the symbol of the Republican party, an E for Europe and 19 stars which - imitating the federalism of the USA - denoted the number of regions in Italy and MAB’s desire to see them all activated (Fig. 3). The maintenance of the tricolor is of particular importance in associating Italy, and patriotism with these three values. Regionalism and federalism were seen, in particular, as the “point of departure for true patriotism” (Calderoli 1958, 79). Indeed, the autonomists in the immediate post-war period were keen to emphasise the need for peace and unity in Europe,

claiming that “the nation is by nature a unitary creature, even if free and unknotted...maximum freedom does not dissolve unity” (Riva 1950, 33).

Following the split of the autonomists in 1961, Ugo Gavazzeni’s *Unione Autonomisti d’Italia* (UAI) also called for a federation of the peoples of a united Europe, including a protection of the minority languages and their teaching in schools. In this sense, the UAI were talking of a Europe of the Regions even before the concept had officially emerged after the evolution of the European Economic Community into the European Union. Gavazzeni also used the concept of a “Padanian” North at the heart of Europe, promoting a list with the title of “*Libera Padania*” in the first 1970 regional elections. (UAI 1970)

The pursuit of federalism, Republicanism and Europeanism in both the 1950s and the 1980s/90s was a reaction against a Roman central state which was seen as unfairly biased towards the South of the peninsula. As Boulliaud and DeMatteo have correctly pointed out, the Bergamascan autonomists always tried to federate “without...going beyond the North” (2004, 36). The 1956 administrative elections would provide an opportunity for the MAB to employ an “orientalist” strategy to define “Northern values” against the Others of the South and Rome.

The ‘invasion of the North by the Other’ encouraged by Rome

The notion of invasion by the Other is a further element which, while tying together the autonomist movements of the 1950s and 1980s, was also affected by their differing historical contexts. Participating in the electoral campaign of 1956 represented a turning point for the Bergamascan autonomists in that “MAB became more identified with the expression of the discontent for the continued arrival of southern bureaucrats (Freddi 1963, 16). Calderoli, in particular, was instrumental in portraying southern migrants as the Other, claiming, for example, that

in Bergamo in these past ten years there has been no Bergamascan judge, not even a Lombard one: all of them have been foreigners, a good part of them *terroni*.....the same can be said for numerous other key jobs (Calderoli 1955, 39).

Calderoli called for Bergamascons to “rise up against this bureaucratic invasion”, claiming that not to do so would risk “divisions between Italians as Bergamo becomes a colony and

land of conquest.” (Calderoli 1958, 16). The notion of the ‘otherness’ of those from the South was further encouraged by the fact that two leading figures in MAB, Anselmo Freddi and Aldo Rizzi, were both teachers, and were particularly sensitive to the issue of national ‘concorsi’ in the teaching sector and the idea that teachers from the south of the peninsula were being given preference. The populist and nativist message of Us versus Them became particularly vicious in MAB’s thinly-veiled attempts to cause divisions between Italians with one of MAB’s exponents stating that

Sending elementary teachers from the South to our mountain valleys is counter-productive...Differences in needs, in customs and habits and way of life constitute an insurmountable barrier to academic output and to understanding (Pacati 1955, 22).

This highlights that another key aim of MAB in standing against a bureaucratic invasion was, according to Guido Calderoli, to “protect dialect from the assault of the authorities and foreign bureaucrats” (Calderoli 1958, 244). Calderoli focused on the presence of bureaucrats in Bergamo who did not speak Bergamascan, stating that it was a bureaucrat’s duty to learn Bergamascan or at least to employ an interpreter (Calderoli 1958, 244).

The defence of dialect and reaffirmation of local customs was a way of taking a stance not only against southerners, but also against Rome. For MAB, the idea that Bergamo received such high levels of migration was exacerbated by a perception of Rome’s exploitation through taxation. Calderoli claimed that Bergamo paid more taxes than anywhere else, disbursing “forty times more than what it received in return” (Calderoli 1955, 244); these claims were accompanied by the image of a parasitic Roman Wolf devouring Lombardy (Fig. 4). This notion of exploitation is also well demonstrated by propaganda which, although made famous by the Lega in the early 1990s, was in fact revealed by Boulliaud and DeMatteo to have been the brainchild of the Bergamascan autonomists (Fig. 5).

However, it is important to note that alongside this anti-southern discourse there was a message which appealed to national unity. The MAB viewed region to region migration as a detriment to national unity, as it meant that Italians were not working to strengthen their own region and, thus, were weakening the nation-state. It argued that

When the regional autonomies of the Constitution are activated...it will no longer be seen necessary to emigrate to other regions...only

then will we all live in Italy without treading on each others toes.
(Freddi 1956: 11)

This concept of regionalism as a force of Italian unity represents a key dividing line between *mabismo* and *legghismo*, which is explored in greater detail in the following section.

Continuity and discontinuity

While the 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of some of the discourse, images and slogans that would later be used by the Lega, the message has changed considerably since the formation of the first autonomist movement, the MAL, in 1947. The changing context of the 1980s and the 1990s, and in particular the transition to the Second Republic following the Tangentopoli scandals led to the Lega abandoning elements which had previously been present in the MAB's message.

On the surface, a key element of continuity between MAB and *legghismo* appears to be the dichotomous association of bureaucratic centralism with fascist totalitarianism on one hand and regionalism with freedom and democracy on the other. This is evident in the Lega Lombarda's protests against the centralism of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, stating that "the Le Pen phenomenon demonstrates that wherever regional autonomy is gagged, fascism triumphs!" (Bossi 1988). Furthermore, it is undeniable that Bossi has always taken a strong anti-fascist position, reflected in his various collections of essays (Bossi 1992; 1993; 1994).

Nevertheless, the Lega's anti-fascism has always differed from the MAB's in that it has been employed as a rhetorical device in its portrayal of Rome as an oppressive system linking fascism to the South. Indeed, the Lega takes the view " [that] Fascism was...a Southern product" whereas "the North was the home of the Resistance" (Levy 2015, 52). Additionally, the Lega's relationship with anti-fascism is much more problematic because of its shift to the right in the early 1990s. This involved the adherence to the Lega of individuals such as Mario Borghezio, who had previously belonged to a number of neo-fascist organisations including Forza Nuova and Ordine Nuovo. More recently, Matteo Salvini's leadership has led the Lega Nord to lurch even further to the right. Not only has Salvini allied himself closely to Marine Le Pen's National Front but he has also participated in anti-immigration protests staged by the Italian neo-fascist organisation *CasaPound*. Additionally, Salvini's August 2017 electoral campaign for garnering votes in the South of the peninsula, 'Noi con Salvini' used an electoral poster which compared democracy negatively against

fascism, noting that Mussolini and fascism had “made Italy great” (*L'Espresso*, 2017.) This is a stark contrast with the post-war autonomists who portrayed themselves as protectors of the ideal of a new nation to be founded on the basis of local autonomies present during the Resistance and were campaigning at a time after the failed project of fascism.

According to Boulliaud's and DeMatteo's study, there were strong links between mabismo and leghismo due to both movements' appealing to a localist, anti-statist and anti-unitarian element present in the Catholic subculture in Bergamo (2004, 38-41). Indeed, a conscious appeal of the Lega to former DC voters can be seen in a dedicated section of the Lega Nord publications *Lombardia Autonomista* and *Lega Nord Italia Federale*. This section, entitled, *I Cattolici votano Lega* contained articles which mirrored the message of the MAB as they portrayed the Lega Nord as the natural home for Catholic voters (Grassi 1992; Leoni 1993; Pivetti 1994). Additionally, the idea of the DC betraying the Bergamascan tradition of autonomy tied into a Catholic subculture which had been present in Calderoli's writings was also echoed by Bossi in his autobiography when he stated that the autonomist roots of the Popular Party (PPI) had been betrayed by the DC (Bossi 1992, 191). Bossi, like the MAB, also quoted the Pope in the Lega's message in 1984 when he released an article which cited John Paul II's appeal to protect “the general rights of minority populations” (Bossi 1984).

These similarities, however, are eclipsed by the fact that the MAB failed to penetrate the DC vote in the way that the Lega Nord did in the late 1980s and early 1990s by exploiting the vacuum left by the DC in former “white zones” and turning them into “green zones” (Cento Bull 2000; Diamanti 1993; 1996). While it is true that the DC's vote in the North was not replaced solely by the Lega Nord, but also by the new political offering of Forza Italia, Bergamo was one particular province which, having previously been a DC stronghold, became one of the key areas of electoral strength of the Lega Nord from 1987 onwards (Agnew 1994, 163-165). The Lega Nord's appeal to Catholic voters in this province and others was also framed very much in the context of the “corruption scandals of the old DC” (Pivetti 1994), which sparked the transition from the First to the Second Italian Republic. Bossi portrayed the Lega Nord as the solution to the malaise of the Italian *partitocrazia*, claiming it had helped a new political fault-line to emerge between liberalist and federalist ideas on the side of the Lega and centralist/statist ideas on the side of the DC (Bossi 1994b). The Bergamascan autonomists of the post-war period, conversely, had never claimed that the role of the DC was defunct in the Lombard region, merely that it needed to adopt regional reform in its political programme.

Closer inspection reveals further discontinuities. The importance of a European identity was present in the early movement's statute, which shows precocious commitment to a "united Europe of the peoples" (Bossi 1983). As with the MAB, the Lega promoted peace through the European Union and emphasised that "European unification is not in contradiction with the Lega's federalist proposal" (Bossi 1992; 1993). Additionally, the Lega's positioning of Padania's identity at the heart of Europe seems to reflect a wider link between the Bergamascan autonomists and the Lega as do parallels between Ugo Gavazzeni's UAI and the Lega in the 1980s as promoter of "the creation of a confederation of European peoples" (Lombardia Autonomista 1983). This use of Padania at the heart of Europe might be seen as a link between the Bergamascan autonomists and the Lega. However, it should be remembered that Gavazzeni had previously belonged to the same movement which had promoted the Italian tri-colour and wished to maintain unity. The Lega Nord's Padania was a very different concept, promoting its own flag and its own borders, the origins of which lay in a federalism which differed greatly from that promoted in the post-war period.

The statute of the Lega Lombarda, written in 1983, after all the regions had been activated, claimed the objective of "transforming the Italian state into a confederation of autonomous regions", rendering it very different from the aims of *mabismo* (Bossi 1983). As far as Republicanism was concerned, while Bossi claimed in a series of essays in 1994 that he wanted to form a new Federal Italian Republic in 1994, his main interest had always been in a Republic of the North in which Lombardy would form the leading region (Bossi 1994).

This idea of a Northern Republic would evolve into secessionism, forming a key part of the Lega's hope that, in the event of failing to meet the criteria for the European Monetary Union, Italy would leave northern industry in crisis, thus rendering it more disposed towards the North (Padania) seceding from the South and the central government (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005, 955-956). As has been highlighted by Cachafeiro and De Winter, the European identity of the leagues was also due to electoral pragmatism as the advent of the European parliamentary elections acted as a springboard for smaller autonomist movements throughout Europe to promote their programmes (Cachafeiro 2000, 81; 2000; DeWinter and Cachafeiro 2002, 493).

Additionally, the early UAI's Padania was seen, at most, as a macro-region acting within Italy's frontiers, not as a separate state. The shift of the Lega to a position of Euro-scepticism following Italy's entry into the EMU in 1998 represented a significant difference to the pro-European message of MAB. From the Lega's point of view, Italy's accession to the

EU represented the EU's rejection of Padania. Subsequently, the Lega viewed the EU "like the Italian state, as a centralist institution and an antagonist of the aspiration for self-government of the Padanian and other European peoples." (Huysseune 2010: 69) This anti-European position has intensified under Salvini, who has over the past three years advocated Italy's exit from the Eurozone and single currency and has used his position as MEP to denounce the EU's "ruining of the European dream" by impinging on the sovereignty of European nation-states. (Lega Nord 2017; Salvini 2017).

Finally, regarding the notion of the invasion of the North, the defence of dialect, local jobs for the local population and the notion of Lombardy as a land of conquest were all present in the discourse of the Lega Lombarda-Lega Nord in the 1980s, as was the use of pejorative language such as *terroni* to define southerners. For example, Passalacqua's research (2009) focuses on some of the sentiments present in the Brescian and Bergamascan heartlands of the Lega where the state bureaucracy was often associated with the South.

The Lega recycled the MAB's discourse surrounding the "invasion of the North" from the South. Indeed, two of the manifestations of anti-southernism which Antonio Moiola's in-depth study of *legghismo* in Lombardy revealed, "Intolerance towards 'terroni' in the public offices of the regions of the North" and "the insistent request to block all financial assistance of the south of Italy" which had been previously part of the MAB's political discourse (Moioli 1991, 288). Furthermore, the idea that the state was "responsible for an iniquitous fiscal policy that was harmful to the 'productive' North and advantageous to the 'parasitic' south" was common to both the MAB and the Lega as was the idea of the South as "a metaphor summing up all that is wrong with Italian society and politics" (Sales 1993, 35-37; Allum and Diamanti 1996, 153).

However, the contextual particularities which influenced the anti-southern discourse differed considerably. For example, references to the Mafia in the Lega Nord's mouthpiece *Lombardia Autonomista* and Bossi's early writings are not found in the MAB's publications. The Lega conflated all southern migration with the measure of State sanctioned protection afforded to Mafia turncoats who had been relocated to the North (so-called "soggiorni obbligati"). Bossi included in the Lega's statute that the movement wished to "prevent the use of Lombardy" as a destination of "immigrants who had committed crimes." (Bossi 1992).

Additionally, while many of the arguments used by the Lega against migration from abroad also echo those used by the MAB during the campaign against migration from the South during the 1950s, a changing notion of the Other also marks a significant discontinuity between the two waves of activism. Biorcio (1991, 63) highlighted that "from 1989, the

protest against southerners was for the most part replaced by propaganda hostile towards foreign migration”. Garau (2015, 111) has more recently stated that “Southerners seem to have now been replaced by non-Italian immigrants”. They are no longer “the main concern of the Lega Nord today”, representing a departure from the focus on southern migration which had been one of the key issues for MAB.

Indeed, an article released as early as 1992 shows how the focus on the Other was shifting from the South towards Islam. Attempting to fan the flames of Islamophobia in Italy, the Lega exploited the news of the expulsion of Islamic Front extremists from Algeria in the early 1990s to conflate extremist Islamism with Islam in general, portraying radical Islamists such as the Islamic Front as the “purest” form of the religion (Lombardia Autonomista 1992). This identification of Islam as a dangerous other, marked an early sign of a nativist and fierce anti-immigration stance which has continued to play a significant role in Lega Nord discourse to this day.

Conclusion.

This article has shed light on a previously under-researched autonomist movement, the MAB, and clarified its relationship with the much more familiar contours of the Lega Nord. It is

important, as Boulliaud and DeMatteo (2004) have shown, to highlight the precedents to the Lega Lombarda-Lega Nord due to the fact that the Lega can be considered as the revival of the MAB's previous upsurge of activism during the 1950s, albeit reframed to suit the political context of the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, focusing only on the similarities in the regional discourse between the post-war autonomists and the Lega can prove more of a hindrance than a help when trying to understand the success of *leghismo* in the 1980s and 1990s. The article has shown how two waves of North Italian regionalist activist held very different objectives with regard to the Italian nation-state: in essence, the first wave of activism represented by the MAB used regionalism and federalism to argue for national unity, while the Lega pursued a programme of national fragmentation and secessionism.

The MAB presented itself as a defender of the 1948 Republican Constitution, arguing that regional government was fundamental to the survival of a democratic, anti-fascist and regionalist Republic during an unstable period of transition for the nation-state. Drawing upon autonomist ideas central to both the Catholic subculture in Bergamo and the anti-fascist resistance, the Bergamascan autonomists argued that bureaucratic centralism threatened national unity and endangered the democratic principles on which the Republic had been founded. Thirty years later, [adjust as necessary] the Lega, reframed anti-fascist discourse, to present fascism as a predominantly southern phenomenon and freedom, liberty, and anti-fascism as essentially Northern qualities. Most recently, as the Lega has lurched to the right under Salvini, the movement has taken a more revisionist view of the fascist era.

Presenting itself as an alternative to the DC, the MAB argued that the mainstream party's centralist stance represented a betrayal of Bergamo's Catholic-autonomist roots and a danger to national cohesion; however, the movement never represented a threat to the DC, and many of its members would eventually join this party. The inability of the MAB to significantly weaken the grip of the DC in Bergamo related to the fact that the movement did not aim to challenge the framework of the Republic after a period of crisis and transition following the fall of fascism. This represents a significant contrast to the period of socio-political upheaval during the transition between the First and Second Italian Republics, which the Lega exploited to argue for neo-federalism and secessionism.

The MAB's redesign of the Italian tri-colour, along republican, European and federalist lines represented a patriotic call to maintain Italian identity, while respecting the regional statutes in the constitution. Conversely, instead of arguing for the regionalism sanctioned by the constitution, the Lega Nord, through proposals for neo-federalist reform and later, threats of secessionism from the Italian state, challenged the very foundations of

the Italian Republic which its predecessors had so defended. This argument for secessionism was at times deeply rooted in the focus on difference between the North and South, and drew upon an anti-southern discourse framework which had also been used by the MAB in the 1950s. However, MAB had qualified its anti-southern position, not with neo-federalism, but with the idea that the nation would be stronger if southerners stayed and worked to improve their own region's economy. The MAB's proto-nativist discourse also did not include any references towards migration from abroad or Islam, which would instead later provide the Lega with another target against which to construct a separate Padanian identity.

In conclusion, the fundamental difference between the MAB and the Lega with regard to the region and the nation-state shows how important it is to avoid focusing solely on the continuities in discourse at the expense of the clear discontinuities between the two movements. It also demonstrates the great significance played by the context in which each movement was founded due to the fact that the historical environment in which a political movement operates is that which makes it unique to its time in terms of purpose, objectives and individual endeavours.

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Italian Summary

Gli studi sulla Lega Nord hanno avuto la tendenza di ignorare l'esistenza di precedenti movimenti per l'autonomia regionale negli anni '50 - come il Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco - o, al contrario, di presupporre una progressione fra i due movimenti a scapito di un'analisi che mostra discontinuità significative. Questo articolo sostiene che nessuno dei due approcci ha avuto successo nel catturare l'importanza dei precursori del

leghismo, e che è necessaria un'analisi che tenga conto delle varie sfumature. Concentrandomi sul Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco (MAB) nelle sue varie incarnazioni tra il 1947 e il 1970, sostengo che gli autonomisti bergamaschi del dopoguerra in un certo senso hanno posto le basi per la Lega Nord di Umberto Bossi; tuttavia, sarebbe storicamente inaccurato rivendicare una linea diretta di continuità tra “mabismo” e “leghismo” a causa dei diversi contesti in cui operava ciascun movimento: rispettivamente i momenti critici dell'era del dopoguerra e post-tangentopoli. Ciò che emerge da un'analisi più approfondita del rapporto tra i due movimenti, come il “mabismo” evoluto poi in “leghismo” negli anni '80, è un quadro dell'autonomia regionale che si allontana dall'ideale dell'unità nazionale e si fa sempre più attratto dal secessionismo

